

Democracy Dies in Darkness

INSIDE LARRY BIRD'S HOTEL, THERE IS A SPECIAL DECOR

THE BOSTON CONNECTION_WORKING SHRINE TO CELTICS' LIVING LEGEND

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By Gordon Edes

TERRE HAUTE, IND. -- I am in a king-sized bed, and when I look above me, I see him, on the wall: Larry Bird, shooting a basketball.

I glance at the clock -- the one made from Larry Bird's free-throw trophy -- then stumble into the bathroom, where I turn on the hot water and step behind the Larry Bird shower curtain, clutching a bar of Larry Bird soap.

I brush my teeth, then rinse my mouth with Larry Bird mouthwash, and stroll into the living room of the Larry Bird suite. On the wall above the television, he's there again, Larry Bird in a suit, his arm around Dinah Mattingly, his fiancee.

Beads of sweat are forming on my forehead. I am from Los Angeles, and I seem to be in the middle of a Magic Johnson nightmare. Is this real, or is it Memorex?

In the hall, a guy in a referee's shirt -- he's too young to be Jake O'Donnell -- is carrying a suitcase down the hall. He says something about the Red Auerbach room. Presumably, that's where the air conditioner blows cigar smoke.

I try to remember the night before. Could this all be the result of something I drank in the Bird's Nest lounge, while watching videotapes of Larry Bird shooting jumpers, passing behind his back, and singing in sneaker commercials? The Celtics weren't playing that night or I could have watched Larry Bird on the satellite dish.

Perhaps it was something I ate in the Boston Garden dining room, where copies of Celtics championship banners hung as tapestries above my head.

Or maybe it was when I stepped inside a glass room, right near the glass case where Larry Bird's MVP trophies were on display -- and shot baskets, airballs mostly, until I was given a certificate that read: "I made three baskets in a row at Larry Bird's Boston Connection."

Everything was fast becoming a green and white blur: The gift shop with the Larry Bird beach towels and Larry Bird key chains, Larry Bird doll outfits and Larry Bird playing cards -- he's the joker in the deck -- Larry Bird mugs and Larry Bird scarfs.

Larry Bird . . . Larry Bird . . . Larry Bird . . .

And I heard voices.

"I've been to Graceland," said a businessman from Indianapolis named Dennis Dye, rummaging through the Larry Bird salt and pepper shakers and Larry Bird Christmas bulbs and Larry Bird baby bibs. "And the only thing that could top this is the Elvis sparklers."

The woman in the gift shop, buying a Larry Bird autographed basketball and a Boston Celtic jacket, said her name was Pitts, Potty Pitts. "My husband's name is Tom," she said, "but we call him Arm."

She said that she was buying the gifts for her husband, age 51.

Just as I am trying to fight my way out of this dream-nightmare, the phone rings. The caller is Glen Ankney, the manager of the Boston Connection, the hotel-shrine that is owned in part by Larry Bird.

"I hope you've enjoyed your stay here," Ankney said. "There isn't anything else quite like it."

So, it is no dream at all. I am in Terre Haute, Ind., the Hoosier heartland of Larry Bird country. Just a few blocks away is Indiana State University, where the Bird legend first took nationwide flight. A couple of hours away by two-lane highway is French Lick, Ind., where Larry Bird Blvd. cuts through in honor of its most celebrated native hick.

The Basketball Hall of Fame is in Springfield, Mass., but for true basketball pilgrims, the Boston Connection may someday become a mecca in its own right.

Before Larry Bird became a legend, Max Gibson gave him a job.

It was at an employees' camp about 15 miles from Terre Haute, near a man-made lake in an old strip-mining pit. Gibson, who was in the coal business and a big booster of Indiana State basketball, was asked by Bill Hodges, then the Sycamores' assistant coach, if he could find work for a shy teen-ager from French Lick.

Gibson put Bird to work, cutting weeds, mowing grass and doing general maintenance work. He also noticed something about Bird right away.

"He showed up and did his job every day, as you might guess," Gibson said. "Anything he started, he completed. I had a lot of ballplayers who had problems getting to work, but Larry was obviously different. You knew he'd be at work 8 o'clock every morning."

Gibson and Bird soon became friends. A pop psychologist might suggest that Gibson became a father figure to Bird, whose own father had committed suicide.

"I really don't think so," Gibson said. "It was more of an equals-type of friendship. We liked the same things -- golf and tennis and hunting and fishing. Gosh. I don't know. Friendships iust hannen."

One day, at an affair honoring Playboy's college all-America team, Bird confided in his friend Gibson.

"He told me he'd be the best basketball player that ever played," Gibson said.

Eventually, Gibson came up with the idea of starting a Larry Bird restaurant, but he never could find the right property. Then another friend, Ankney, a former high school football coach, proposed the idea of a hotel, and with what Gibson terms a significant investment from Bird, the men bought a Sheraton Inn in Terre Haute last February, renovated it and turned it into the Boston Connection.

Bird is not listed as an officer of the corporation, although Gibson said that they have equal shares of the investment, with Ankney and another partner, Tom Clancy, owning smaller chunks.

"I can honestly say that I'm not a businessman," Bird said at the time of the hotel's opening. "I'm a basketball player. That's my job. Everything I've done, I've done with friends."

It is with those friends that Bird communes after the basketball season is over. He divided much of the summer between French Lick and the hotel, though when he's at the Boston Connection, he doesn't stay in the Larry Bird suite.

Instead, he stays in an elegantly appointed, unmarked suite out of sight of the curiosity seekers. In one closet, there are golf clubs, a tennis racket, a fishing pole, several pairs of sneakers and about a dozen golf shirts. Even Bird, though, would wear a jacket to eat in the formal MVP lounge, Ankney said.

Orville Redenbacher, the popcorn man, has stayed in the Larry Bird suite. He used to teach school in a nearby county.

Gerald Ford has spent the night. So have former British prime minister Harold Wilson and television executive Fred Friendly. All have spoken at Indiana State functions.

Libbi Nice, a cashier in the hotel gift shop, is a student at Indiana State. Every so often, she runs into Eddie Bird, one of Larry's younger brothers, who is playing basketball for the Sycamores this season.

"Eddie's a really quiet person," Libbi said. "It's hard to get a hello out of him."

Max Gibson remembers when Larry Bird was the same way.

"He was very backward and hard to get close to," Gibson said. "But once you did, he's a friend forever."

"It's funny, if you saw Larry with his brothers Eddie and Jeff in person, you'd think he had no interest in them other than to kick them in the butt. But he'll call me every week or two to ask how they're doing."

"You know, I'm not surprised at what Larry has done as a basketball player, but I am surprised at his speaking ability the way he can stand up in front of a group of people. That I would never have believed."

And now, Larry Bird is showing signs of settling down, what with his engagement to Dinah Mattingly, who went to high school in Terre Haute and met Bird at college. After Bird bought the engagement ring, he asked Ankney to hold onto it for safe keeping.

"I don't know if it was bigger than his championship rings," Gibson said with a laugh. "But diamond-wise it was."

Has a wedding date been set?

"I don't think so," Gibson said. "He told me, 'After the season is over,' but he didn't know which season."

And when Bird's seasons as a Celtic are over -- he has said that he'll play only a few more years -- what then?

Perhaps, after basketball, a hotel chain? Who would be more suited than Bird to buy out the All-Star Inns? Larry Bird's Boston All-Star Connection? Has a ring to it.